

Search for



[Login](#) [Help](#) [Contact Us](#) [About](#)

Think you might have access to this content via your library?

[Login](#)



You are not currently logged in. You can participate in the discussion by [access options](#) for more information.

See



Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem

Jack Goody
The British Journal of Sociology
Vol. 12, No. 2 (Jun., 1961), pp. 142-164

Published by: [Wiley-Blackwell](#)

Article Stable URL:
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/586928>

[« Previous Item](#) [Next Item »](#)

RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

[More Rights Options](#)

[JSTOR Terms And Conditions](#)

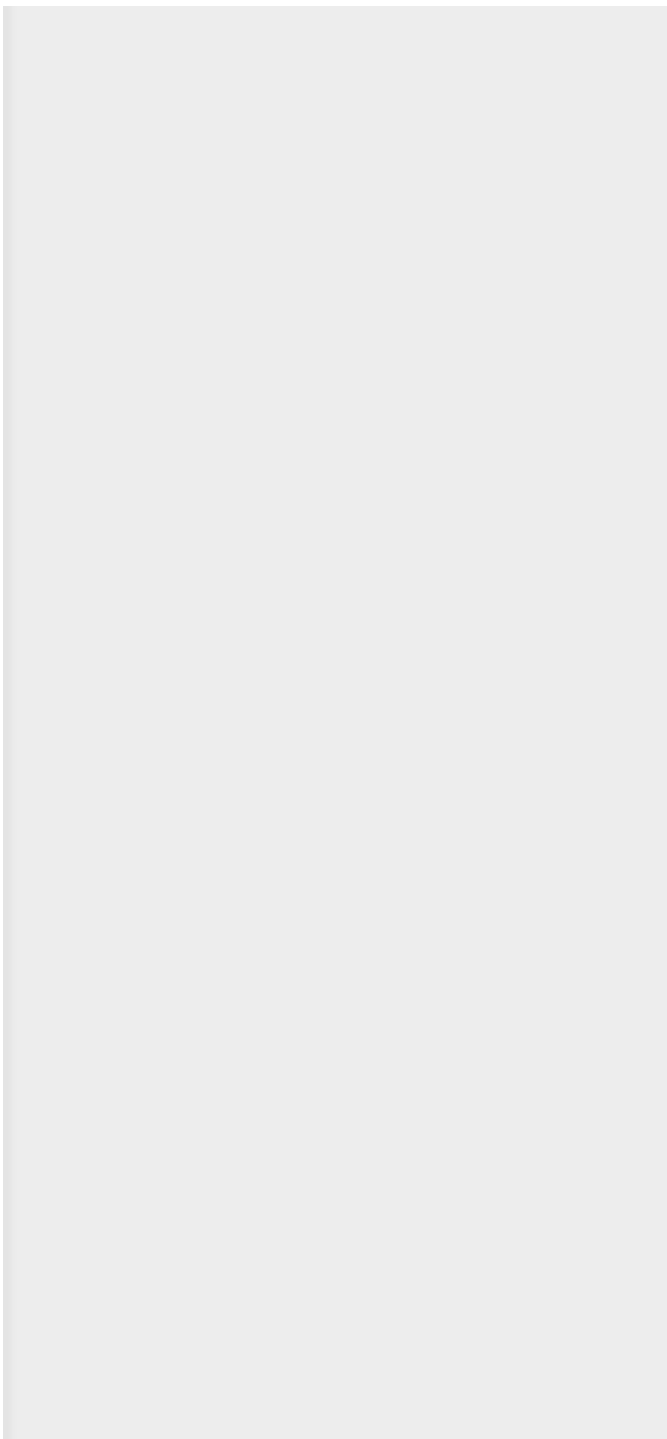
RELIGION AND RITUAL: THE DEFINITIONAL PROBLEM

Jack Goody

IN THIS PAPER I want to explore the problem of what is involved in categorizing acts and beliefs as religious, or ritual, or magico-religious, with the purpose not only of clearing the way for subsequent treatment of my own empirical data concerning the LoDagaa of North-

ern Ghana, but also of clarifying certain aspects of the analysis of social systems in general.

For some writers such an investigation has appeared a profitless enterprise. At the beginning of *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, a book which as its subtitle suggests owes much to the work of Durkheim as well as to the English anthropologists, Jane Harrison comments on the erroneous approach of those inquirers who start with a general term *religion* of which they had a preconceived idea, and then try to fit into it any facts that come to hand. Instead she proposes no initial definition, but remarks that 'we shall collect the facts that admittedly are religious and see from what human activities they appear to have sprung' (1912: 29). It is yet more tempting for the inquirer into societies farther removed from our own tradition than that of ancient Greece to adopt a similar approach, and quietly to overlook the definitional problems. The dangers, however, outweigh the advantages. In refusing to define her field of discourse, Jane Harrison was far from escaping the problem she perceived; she was merely taking refuge in an implicit rather than an explicit judgment of what constitutes the 'admittedly religious'. It goes without saying that such hidden decisions may influence the investigation of particular events. It might be possible to examine the mortuary institutions of the LoDagaa without raising the wider issues were it not that the analysis of the specific data must depend, to some extent at least, upon the position which the investigator takes with regard to them. Moreover, the difficulties which arise from a failure adequately to delimit one's universe of discourse become much more complicated when comparative studies are involved. With these matters in mind, therefore, I shall try and deal with some of the general problems connected with the examination of what have variously and





End of preview. [Get access](#) to this entire item.

The British Journal of Sociology © 1961 [The London School of Economics and Political Science](#)

[JSTOR Home](#) [About](#) [Search](#) [Browse](#) [Terms and Conditions](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility](#) [Help](#) [Contact us](#)

JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways.

©2000-2011 ITHAKA. All Rights Reserved. JSTOR®, the JSTOR logo, and ITHAKA® are registered trademarks of ITHAKA